

THE FORTUNES OF E. MARR

BY
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YOU may not have known that Rahway is a literary center. Perhaps it isn't now, as the S. S. S. has gone out of business, though there may be other literary aspirants doing business in the town. Let this be a lesson to them not to depend upon pretty girls in their business.

The S. S. S., or Short Story Syndicate, was started about two years ago, and it lasted for ten months. Then came the sensational finish which gives it its present literary value. As the last survivor of the company, the rights to the story are mine—so here goes!

We thought we were geniuses when we began; we know better now. The only genius in the company was the Prettiest Girl in Rahway. Let me begin with the dramatic personae.

Adoniram Chase: a chap of Puritan-Pierlin stock, with four expensive years' experience at Harvard, where he did not graduate. He was nothing less than a human dynamo, keen as a needle, merry as a hand-organ, a wiry, springy chap, with an infectious laugh. He might be called the brains of the conspiracy.

Mark McComus, a night drug clerk in Elizabeth; a licensed pharmacist with a diploma. He was of the melancholy type, a poet down to his socks. He was the kind who knows all about "atmosphere" and "color" and all that sort of thing—not the dirty paper-collar kind exactly, but enough of a decorousness in an amateur way to be picturesque.

Me! I started as a civil engineer, and turned several right angles in my career. I've done everything, architecture of the suburban shingled variety, and thence, through book-cover designing, poster drawing, to what I pleased to call literature.

And lastly, the Prettiest Girl in Rahway—Clara Foster, a dyed-in-the-wool blonde, with a complexion like an early spring sunrise and a contralto voice fit to subdue a cave-man in a rage. No, not caged. She would have been given the thirty-third degree and no questions asked by any beauty device in the United States or Europe. She simply dazzled you. As for men—she just lit 'em and throw 'em away like fire-crackers. How she ever happened to float into Rahway, I never knew; but

we could work undisturbed, and one common room where we could discuss plots and style and criticize each other's work. Art is the same thing, and profit by the fellowship. It worked pretty well, and we got a lot of stimulation and encouragement out of each other.

At first, each man was for himself, but Adoniram wasn't satisfied with that as we found it hard to pay the rent after the second month, and so, under his direction, we became frankly commercial and started the syndicate. We had had a good bunch of rejections that week, and a radical change seemed necessary.

"See here," Adoniram said, "we've got to pull together more. Divided we stand—to lose our last cent; united we fall—from our ideals but win the coin. We must organize and use modern methods. We must cooperate. Personal influence with the editors is what counts, nowadays, and we must get our stuff pushed that way. Who's going to push it?" He paused dramatically for a reply. He always was keen on the Socratic method of argument.

But none of us seemed to answer. We'd had some personal experience with editors, and had failed to secure a sphere of influence. Somehow none of us had the magnetism, the charm and the Corbala Something necessary to change MSS. into "copy."

Adoniram waited for us to become sufficiently pessimistic, and then he sprung his bolt. "What we've got to have," he exclaimed, waving a manuscript, "is a girl—the prettiest girl we can hire—to cajole editors with. Who is the prettiest girl in Rahway?"

There was only one answer to that question. "Clara Foster!" we cried as one man.

"Clara Foster is elected!" said Adoniram. "She is now typewriting for ten per in Hoboken, at the spool factory, and on that stipend she arrays herself like the Queen of Sheba with a Marcel wave, and goes to matinees in New York. Query: Can we raise the ten a week, and perhaps raise it to eleven, and train her to bewilder the Gotham editor with our genius? Answer: We can! I hereby appoint myself a committee of one to investigate, arrange, bribe and report. The collection for incidental expenses will now take place."

She set out in earnest, loaded for big game with two short stories of Adoniram's, a humorous article of mine on "Hearing New York" (the scheme was to bottle the noises and sell them as a remedy for nostalgia), and half a dozen Christmas poems of Mac's. It was July then, but they were all written under the influence of her azure glances, etc., etc., and they did have a zip to them. To our mad surprise she sold seventy per cent of them, and returned with forty dollars spot cash. We raised her salary immediately to twelve a week and expenses. Then we got busy turning out stuff. You've no idea how it helps to have a few things sell!

She used the common meeting-room as her headquarters, but she seldom had it to herself, for we would work like mad to get a chance to read our things to her and watch for her expression to change.

She had only about three—patient boredom, patronizing amusement and rapture. We seldom drew rapture, but we always hoped for it, and expected it. The Prettiest had a mind as near to that of the Average Reader as it would be possible to find. If you boiled down the whole Mississippi Valley into one brain, that would be Clara Foster's. We revered her opinions accordingly. It was an education and a joy to have Old Subscriber always ready to listen and give her verdict through lips like those of the Prettiest. It began to dawn upon us that Art and Common Sense needed no divorce. She said one of two things: either "I like it," or "don't like it." She didn't bother you with analysis and reasons.

Our next step in cooperation was to pool our interests, and, abandoning our lust for private fame, we sent everything we wrote out under the name of E. Marr. Fiction and poetry, humor, pathos and essay, it all travelled to New York in the Prettiest's green cloth bag attached to that short, romantic name. Before long E. Marr began to win a mild renown in the magazine field, and we didn't dare split up the partnership for fear of sinking back into the ranks of the Great Unknown. Our best customer was the Public Magazine, a brisk, new illustrated paper, and E. Marr was getting four cents a word for everything sold. But it wasn't always easy to satisfy the editor, who seemed to have more personality than most of them, and not even the Prettiest Girl in Rahway could force all our manuscripts down his throat. She went to see him regularly twice a week, though, and we worked like elephants to keep her provided with ammunition.

Now, as I've said, her first attitude towards our work was that of modest ignorance of art, a mere expression of interest or the reverse. Soon, however, we noticed a change in her mental processes. She seemed to be growing up to us, mentally, and she delivered cold, practical suggestions with a remarkably steady aim. From this, she sometimes got to actual analysis and critical advice. It did seem funny that she was developing so fast, but what she said proved to be so true when she came to sell the work, that we got to rely on her more and more. I think, too, at about this time we began to mix up our opinion of her intelligence with our opinion of her looks.

One day the Prettiest went a step further and came out with a new scheme she had evidently been thinking out for some days. I had noticed that she hadn't eaten so much candy, and expected a crisis.

"What you want to do is to divide up the labor, the same as they do in a factory," she said. "The business man would know better than to do this hit-or-miss way. You want to specialize, and each man ought to do what he can do best. Adoniram, here, is most ingenious at plots, but he can't write a good live story with human interest or uplift in it. Mark McComus ought to do all that, for he's got just heaps of pathos and local color and characterization and all that sort of thing. You ought to do the polishing and shaping into shape, and the architectural part, the finish and the sparkle. We ought to talk over the story and let Adoniram rough it out till he's got the mass. Then Mac will put in a whole lot of feeling and blood and poetry, and you, Jack, will hold it over and sharpen it up and rearrange it and sandpaper the edges. Then, I'll sell it. We can do better work and more of it that way. What do you say?"

We looked at the Prettiest in amazement, then we surrendered. She had no imagination! It was only good horse business sense. But combined with her dimples it convinced us completely. She was elected General Manager of the Syndicate. She insisted upon a roll-top desk, and she got it. She bought a blue pencil out of her own money. Then we proceeded to open the works on strict commercial principles, keeping office hours from 10 a. m. till 4 p. m., with an hour off for lunch.

Things went briskly with the S. S. S. after that. We saw more of the Prettiest, and she did seem to have the art of making the sun shine on all sides of the house at once. I've seen curls and dimples before, and I thought I was girl-proof, but the Prettiest had a Cupid's bow mouth into the bargain, and white teeth that made her smile sheer magic.

The trouble began when Adoniram started to go into executive session with the General Manager two or three times in a forenoon. Mac and I didn't like it a little bit. When the two of them had a consultation and put their heads together, the heads came a little too close.

"This thing of Ad's conning her so ought to be stopped," McComus said to me, after he'd stood it as long as he could. "The girl has no mother to warn her, and I think it's up to us to give her a hint not to see so much of him. Besides, he's neglecting his work."

"You're right," I said. "I'll have a talk with her about it."

"No, I think it will be better for me to do it," he said, decidedly. "I'm the oldest, and I'll be more brotherly, you know."

We finally compromised by making ourselves a committee of two, and the next time Adoniram was off duty, we stated our views to her. The Prettiest best surprised, she was gripped, she was hurt by our suspicions. She threatened to leave if we didn't like the way she acted. That scared us so that we smoothed it over as well as we could, and by the time that was over and she had turned her smile on again, we were in no condition to give advice. In a week McComus and I were racing so hard for her favor that poor Adoniram had to interfere and protest. For some time we watched each other and made remarks, but the Prettiest was as cool as glass and played no favorites.

But pretty soon we had another complaint. She was going into town so often that we missed her something fierce. We'd got into the habit of working where we could look over the top of the table to see her—for the inspiration, you know—and it was no fun at all watching an empty roll top and a vacant chair. To be sure she did sell our stuff, but we couldn't understand why she took so much time over it. Mac suggested that she send the manuscripts off by mail.

"Then I ought to resign," she said. "A Prettiest Girl stands no better show by mail than any other else, and if I'm nothing more than a mere ornament to this office, why—"

"Oh, inspiration wasn't in the contract," the Prettiest answered. "I have to go to New York to keep from being starved to death. Besides, I have to do some shopping. If I want to dress the part."

We were then in the midst of a 35,000 word novelette, our most ambitious attempt. It was as

pretty a piece of literary dovetailing as you ever saw. But we did need the Prettiest badly, for she was certainly keen on feminine psychology, and everything about women was passed up to her from how to cook oatmeal to fashionable weddings. As a woman she did excel. She was all the women you ever met, rolled into one. We put her into every story we ever wrote. She was like a model in a studio.

Adoniram used to call out, "Oh, Clara, please come in here a minute—I want to describe how a girl's hand looks as it rests on a man's shoulder!" And before he had finished (it always took a suspiciously long time), McComus would butt in, to say:

"Say, Clara, suppose I was a man you'd never seen but twice, and as I left you at your door I tried to kiss you. Just show me how you'd act, will you? This is the way he is supposed to do it!"

Of course I needed her, too, and whenever I had a good last love scene to do I insisted upon her help. Besides, I had to probe her soul for the treacherous regards the dialect current in type-writing circles.

We had long ago recognized the folly of interfering with each other, for we always had good, legitimate excuses on hand, and finally we settled into a sort of armed neutrality, and it was tacitly agreed that we were three rivals and the best man was to win. Not that the Prettiest was consulted in this, however; it was decided without actually saying so, at an indignation meeting we held to protest at her going up to town three times in one week.

Meanwhile the Public Magazine was a steady buyer of the works of E. Marr.

From the internecine contest in the rooms of the S. S. S. the rivalry was carried on out of office hours. I had a friend who owned an automobile and he was willing to lend it to me for merely the repairs. In this way I secured a valuable block of Clara Foster's time, and I invested it to good advantage. Clara looked the Prettiest even in a leather coat and deep-sea diving goggles, and she always put her hand on my arm in a frightened way when we turned sharp curves. Other things of a mildly exciting nature happened till I began to feel pretty sure that I was going to come in ahead of the bunch. I put it up to her straight, out at the Hermitage. I was as scared as if I were offering a story to an editor. She blushed and seemed to be a bit worried about it.

"I never expected this," she told me. "Really, you don't know how surprised I am. You'll simply have to give me time to think it over. I think I shall take a vacation for a week, anyway, for I'm tired, and you know I have worked pretty hard out of office hours with you, haven't I? Do you mind if I don't decide till then, and write you a note in answer?"



WE REVERENCED HER OPINIONS.

I was such a fool, in fact, that I began to joke McComus about her throwing him down.

"Don't be too gay about that!" he said. "In about a week I expect to give you a piece of news that'll make you sit up and take notice. You may think I've been sitting on the fence waiting for you and Clara to go by, but there's a little rowboat and a well-worn copy of 'Lucille' that have witnessed important conversations between me and Miss Foster, and don't you ignore that!"

I pumped him then without delicacy and found that he was expecting a letter in reply to his proposal. After comparing notes we adjourned to Adoniram in a body and collected his evidence.

"I'm only waiting for the little word 'accepted,'" he said, "before I announce my resignation and

Clara's from the S. S. S. There'll be no printed form accompanying my best piece of work. I'm sorry boys, but I can't hold out hopes to you. You're stung."

We had a pretty sad old time, that week, in the factory, and we watched the mails as we used to in the old days before we had an agent. It didn't seem like the old place without the Prettiest at her roll-top desk, sucking a blue pencil and smiling at each one in turn.

The first mail on Monday brought us three letters, all addressed by typewriter. Inside they were all three alike:

"Miss Foster regrets to say that the proposal you have been so kind as to offer, is not at present available. Her needs are limited to special interests with which she is now well supplied, so that a declination does not necessarily imply any fault or lack of excellence on the part of the offer submitted. Thanking you for favoring her with the same, she desires to announce that she is about to assume the management of the Editor of the Public Magazine."

That was why she had been going to New York three times a week. That was why E. Marr had succeeded so well with the Public. That was where she had got her ideas on criticism and her technical hints. We wrote a round robin to the editor upon his engagement, voted thanks to our ex-manager, and then the factory shut down. Collaboration without the friendly offices of the Prettiest Girl in Rahway would have been absurd. The Company disbanded and shared the treasury.

Clara Foster appeared next day in a new hat—a wonder. She was not only the Prettiest Girl in Rahway, but the Prettiest Girl on the Atlantic seaboard, the Prettiest on the Continent—in the World! She greeted us warmly, but there was a shade of anxiety in her demeanor. After a few words, and a smile apiece, she sat down at her old place by the roll-top desk.

"You know I've done all I could for the S. S. S., don't you, boys?" she asked.

We agreed, and she ventured to smile again.

"I've sold your stuff and raised the prices, and delivered the money, haven't I? You've never done so well before, and you've made lots of money, haven't you?"

We nodded sadly. Not one of us but would have rather had Clara than fame or wealth or success.

"Then there's one thing I want to tell you, and I want to ask you all a favor."

We waited in silence.

"I hate to confess it, but really, it wasn't much of a fib. I don't see how it hurt you any. But



SHE SIMPLY DAZZLED YOU.

when she first appears upon the horizon she is a typewriter at a spool factory at ten dollars a week. That was the bottom of the ladder for her. The last I heard she was still climbing. You can't stop a girl like that, and prophets hide their shamed heads.

Well, Adoniram and Mac and I had come together by chance over a chessboard at the Y. M. C. A. building, and it wasn't long before we had all discovered a consanguinity of Soul. We were all writing, on the sly, and we all had vaulting ambitions. Adoniram had had two stories printed in a five-cent magazine (one was illustrated, too), and McComus had contributed to the poet's corner in an Elizabeth paper. I had been bothering the big monthlies a good deal, beginning at the top, as Emerson advises, and I scorned anything but Art, which I then defined as the sort of stuff that won't sell. Oh, yes, I was too good for them, and all that! I had it pretty bad.

Naturally, it was Adoniram, the schemer, who first suggested the Short Story Syndicate, and as soon as his plot was elucidated we came in strong for it. His idea was that we hire a barn or some old place where we wouldn't be disturbed, partition it off, and each of us have his own room where

We made it unanimous. Adoniram got away with twenty-four dollars and disappeared. Three days later he appeared at the headquarters of the S. S. S. with the Prettiest, paid for a fortnight in advance.

The Prettiest knew something about business methods from her experience in the spool-factory, and this wisdom she combined with the use of her blue eyes in proportions that made the ordinary man throw up his hands and empty his pockets. She was very patient when we gave her her instructions as to how to approach the throne rooms, but it was evident that she intended to see the thing through in her own sweet way.

We loaded her up with fresh, new-laid MSS., as she declined to carry any shop-worn stock. That put us behind about a week, but in the meantime she had been in New York doing editorial sancta, and had inserted a few wedges. We asked no questions, the way she had hypnotized us being pretty good security for her ability to soothe and charm. In her idle time, while we watched her, with the points of our pencils in our mouths, she sat about and made pictures of herself in the S. S. S. office, and ate chocolates.

NEXT WEEK, "The Moth and the Candle,"
By JOANNA SINGLE.